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Metaphors We Understand by: Conceptual Metaphors and the Framing of Canadian Identity

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Abstract

This paper examines the conceptual metaphors through which Canadian national identity is constructed and framed. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003) and framing theory, it argues that the figures recurrently used to describe Canada are not incidental turns of phrase but systematic mappings that structure how the country is reasoned about, in politics and policy as much as in self-description. Based on existing scholarship, government and institutional discourse, and canonical literary criticism, the study analyses six dominant mappings: CANADA IS A MOSAIC, A PEACEKEEPER, A NORTHERN FRONTIER, A FAMILY, A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY, and A STOREHOUSE OF RESOURCES. It also considers two schemas derived from literary criticism, Atwood's CANADIAN EXISTENCE IS SURVIVAL and Frye's garrison mentality, the latter grounded in the CONTAINER image schema. Each metaphor is approached from a dual perspective, setting its institutionally endorsed, celebratory reading against the critical counter-reading it backgrounds. Two patterns emerge. First, across otherwise unrelated source domains, the counter-readings converge on the position of Indigenous peoples and the structures of settler colonialism, which suggests that this backgrounding is a structural feature of how Canadian identity is figuratively organized rather than an accident of any single metaphor. Second, both the mosaic/melting pot opposition and the contrast between Frye's CONTAINER and the American PATH schema show an identity defined against the United States. Written from an outsider's European perspective, the paper concludes that Canadian identity is best described as a contested field of competing metaphors rather than one master metaphor, and that the choice among them is itself a form of political work.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, framing, Canadian national identity, multiculturalism, settler colonialism, image schemas

Introduction

National identity is rarely apprehended directly; it is, instead, constructed and communicated through language, and above all through the figurative structures that language makes available. Since Lakoff and Johnson's foundational claim that metaphor is not merely a stylistic ornament but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition, scholars across linguistics, political science, and cultural studies have turned to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to examine how abstract social and political categories—nationhood, belonging, citizenship—are made comprehensible by being mapped onto more concrete,

embodied domains of experience. Canada offers a particularly rich site for such inquiry, epecially for the European perspective, separated by huge geopolitical and cultural distances. What is salient to anybody interested in the matter is that due to lacking a single founding myth, a unifying ethnic core, or an uncontested narrative of origin, Canadian identity has long been described by its own commentators as elusive, fragmented, or perpetually "in question", continuously reshaping itself (Angus 1997; Mackey 2002). Yet this apparent absence of a stable referent has not prevented the emergence of a remarkably consistent set of figurative resources through which Canadians, their institutions, and their media routinely talk themselves into being: the nation as mosaic rather than melting pot, as a vast and demanding wilderness, as a family of two founding peoples (or, more recently, of many peoples), as a journey still underway, and as a northern nation whose character is shaped by cold, huge spaces, resilience and endurance.

Our main aim is to argue that these figures are not incidental turns of phrase but conceptual metaphors in the technical sense: systematic mappings from source domains—geography, kinship, journey, climate—onto the target domain of national identity, mappings that structure not only how Canadians describe their country but how they reason about its politics, its policies, and its place in the world. Framing theory offers a complementary lens here, since the metaphors in question do not simply describe a pre-existing national self but actively frame which aspects of that self come to the fore, which possibilities for policy and self-understanding appear natural, and which are rendered marginal or unthinkable. The choice between "mosaic" and "melting pot," for instance, is never merely descriptive; it encodes competing commitments about assimilation, pluralism, and the proper relationship between part and whole, and it has demonstrably shaped multicultural policy discourse since its entrenchment in the 1970s (apud Porter 1965). Similarly, framing the nation through the imagery of wilderness or the North does more than evoke landscape; it positions hardiness, self-reliance, and quiet endurance as constitutive national virtues, often in implicit or explicit contrast to a more expansive, imperial imaginary attributed to Canada's southern neighbour.

Drawing on the most salient works on foundational metaphors relevant for the Canadian territory, this study identifies and analyzes the dominant conceptual metaphors through which Canadian identity has been articulated, tracing both their cognitive underpinnings and their ideological effects. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to two overlapping bodies of scholarship: the cognitive-linguistic literature on metaphor and nationhood, which has more often examined European and American cases than the Canadian one, and the political-cultural literature on Canadian identity, which has richly documented the content of national self-understanding but has more rarely asked how the figurative architecture of that understanding constrains and enables particular ways of imagining the country. The analysis thus focuses on the main identity-related metaphors that help shape global views on Canada, such as those of container and mosaic, of family and kinship, of journey and becoming, and of landscape and climate, among others.

It is important to point out from the very beginning that these metaphors are considered from a double-sided perspective, highlingting their positive and negative facets, as they permenently interact, compete, and occasionally contradict one another within a national identity that may be most accurately described not as a single coherent metaphor but as a contested field of metaphorical possibilities. Another obvious caveat is that the author's position is undeniably that of the outsider, with no direct unmediated knowledge of the

immediate realities in Canada, but rather the kaleidoscopic perspective of a member of the 'global village', resulting from the study of specialized literature and topical research.

Theoretical considerations

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), initially developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980/2003), offers a particularly productive framework for investigating Canadian identity because it approaches metaphor not merely as a rhetorical ornament but as a fundamental mechanism through which individuals and communities conceptualize social reality. As Lakoff and Johnson famously argue, "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action" (2003, 3), since the conceptual system through which people perceive and interpret experience is itself substantially metaphorical. For example, in the conceptual metaphor NATION IS A CONTAINER, the physical properties of a container—its interior, exterior, boundaries, points of entry, and capacity to include or exclude—are projected onto the abstract concept of the nation, making everything associated to it easier to grasp. At the heart of CMT is consequently the understanding that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 5). Applied to national identity, this principle suggests that abstract and inherently complex notions such as *nation*, *belonging*, *multiculturalism*, *cultural unity*, or *collective identity* can be cognitively structured through more concrete experiential domains. Thus, conceptualizations of CANADA AS A MOSAIC, CANADA AS NORTH, CANADIAN EXISTENCE AS SURVIVAL, CANADA AS A PEACEKEEPER, or CANADA AS A SANCTUARY/GATEKEEPER do more than provide vivid descriptions of the country: they select particular aspects of Canadian experience and organize them into culturally intelligible models. CMT is especially relevant here because metaphorical conceptualization is sensitive to cultural and historical context. In the same vein, Kövecses (2005) emphasizes that "conceptual metaphors […] vary cross-culturally" (p. 67), demonstrating that metaphor reflects differences in cultural experience rather than functioning as an entirely universal and invariant cognitive mechanism. This cultural dimension is particularly significant in the Canadian case, where, as highlighted above, identity has repeatedly been constructed through competing ideas of plurality, territory, survival, immigration, and international responsibility. Contemporary empirical research confirms the productivity of such an approach: Shakoury and Boers (2024), for example, identified metaphorical conceptualizations of multiculturalism in a corpus of 646 Canadian newspaper opinion pieces, showing that competing metaphors encode different evaluations of what Canadian multicultural society is or ought to be. CMT therefore makes it possible to view Canadian identity not as a single, stable essence but as a dynamic conceptual construction produced through multiple, sometimes contradictory metaphorical models to be further analysed below. According to this perspective, the inclusive logic of the MOSAIC may coexist with the selective logic of the GATEKEEPER, the protective image of the SANCTUARY does not contradict that of the bounded GARRISON, and the vulnerable SURVIVOR tallies in with the internationally active PEACEKEEPER. Analysing these metaphors consequently reveals not only how Canada is represented linguistically, but also the underlying cultural values, tensions, historical experiences, and ideological choices through which Canadian national identity is continually imagined and renegotiated.

Moreover, metaphors necessarily involve processes of highlighting and hiding various components. By emphasizing certain characteristics of a concept, a metaphor may simultaneously background others, thus providing a more nuanced perspective on concepts that are notoriously hard to define. Describing a multicultural nation as a mosaic, for instance, highlights diversity, distinctiveness, and the combination of separate elements into a larger whole, whereas it may obscure inequalities or conflicts among those constituent elements. Similarly, conceptualizing immigration through the metaphor of a gate foregrounds boundaries, admission, selection, and control. Conceptual metaphors are therefore not neutral descriptions but interpretative models capable of shaping social attitudes, institutional practices, political discourse, and collective understandings of identity.

Main conceptual metaphors describing Canada

Upon examining the available materials, there are five main conceptual mappings that stand out as representative for Canada and its identity as perceived by its own inhabitants, as well as the outside world:

CM1: CANADA IS A MOSAIC

CM2: CANADA IS A PEACEKEEPER

CM3: CANADA IS A NORTHERN FRONTIER

CM4: CANADA IS A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

CM5: CANADA IS A STOREHOUSE OF RESOURCES

These recurring patterns manage to condense complex historical, cultural, geographical, and political experiences into accessible cognitive models. Rather than presenting Canada as a single, stable or homogeneous entity, these metaphors foreground different and sometimes competing dimensions of nationhood. CANADA IS A MOSAIC emphasizes cultural diversity and the coexistence of distinct communities within a larger whole; CANADA IS A PEACEKEEPER constructs the country as a cooperative and morally responsible international actor; while CANADA IS A NORTHERN FRONTIER associates national identity with vastness, wilderness, exploration, endurance, and adaptation. Other conceptualizations, such as CANADA IS A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY, frame the country as a destination associated with immigration, social mobility and renewal, whereas CANADA IS A DIPLOMATIC POWERHOUSE highlights negotiation, mediation and multilateral engagement on the international stage. Finally, CANADA IS A STOREHOUSE OF RESOURCES foregrounds the historical and economic significance of land, energy, minerals, forests and other forms of natural wealth. Considered together, these conceptual metaphors do not merely describe Canada; they participate in the continuing construction and negotiation of Canadian identity by highlighting particular values and experiences while inevitably backgrounding others.

Upon further analysis, CM1 seems to be the most relevant from a statistic point of view. It apparently emerged during the twentieth century as a distinctive way of conceptualizing Canadian cultural diversity, particularly in contrast with the American “melting pot”. Whereas the melting-pot model implies that immigrant cultures are gradually blended into a relatively homogeneous national culture, the mosaic suggests that individual cultural

components can remain recognizable while simultaneously forming part of a larger collective pattern. The metaphor was popularized by John Murray Gibbon's *Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation* (1938) and later acquired a sociological dimension through John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic* (1965). Its central conceptual mapping is therefore relatively transparent: CULTURAL GROUPS ARE INDIVIDUAL PIECES OF A MOSAIC, while CANADA IS THE LARGER PICTURE CREATED BY THEIR COMBINATION. The persistence of cultural distinctiveness is essential to this model; indeed, the same formulation was taken over by contemporary government acts describing the mosaic as a society in which individuals can "maintain their identities and still be part of the whole" (Government of Canada 2017). This principle is also compatible with Kymlicka's liberal theory of multicultural citizenship, according to which cultural membership is not an obstacle to individual freedom but an important condition for it. From this angle, integration need not entail the abandonment of inherited cultural identities; rather, participation in a common political community can coexist with meaningful cultural difference.

The mosaic became particularly powerful as a national metaphor when cultural pluralism was incorporated into Canadian public policy. In 1971, Pierre Elliott Trudeau's government adopted multiculturalism within a bilingual framework as official federal policy, affirming the cultural contributions of diverse ethnic communities and supporting their ability to preserve and develop their cultures. Trudeau explicitly accepted the argument that different cultural communities were "essential elements in Canada," thereby giving political expression to the basic logic of the mosaic: national unity could be created through, rather than despite, cultural difference. (Pier 21, 1971). Banting and Kymlicka (2010) similarly argue that Canada's official self-definition as a multicultural nation means that immigrants are regarded as a "constituent part of the nation," and they observe that multiculturalism enables immigrants to combine ethnic identification with attachment to Canada rather than forcing a choice between the two. Thus, CANADA IS A MOSAIC functions as more than a descriptive image of demographic diversity: it has developed into an ideological and institutional model of Canadian nationhood, foregrounding plurality, cultural preservation, inclusion, and unity-in-difference, and contributing substantially to Canada's international image as a progressive multicultural democracy.

Despite its positive associations with diversity and inclusion, CM1 has been criticized for oversimplifying the realities of multicultural coexistence. By presenting Canadian society as a harmonious arrangement of distinct cultural pieces, the metaphor tends to foreground unity while obscuring the structural inequalities experienced by racialized, immigrant, and Indigenous communities. It also leaves limited space for identities that are fluid, hybrid, intersectional, and frequently contested, since the image of the mosaic implies relatively stable and clearly bounded cultural components. More significantly, the multicultural mosaic may conceal the continuing influence of settler-colonial structures on Canadian citizenship, belonging, and access to land and political power. From an Indigenous perspective, the celebration of multicultural diversity can divert attention from unresolved questions of sovereignty, dispossession, treaty obligations, and territorial rights. Coulthard (2014), for example, argues that state-based politics of recognition may incorporate Indigenous difference symbolically without fundamentally transforming the colonial structures that sustain dispossession, while Simpson (2014) similarly emphasizes the need to move beyond forms of recognition that leave settler-colonial relations intact. Multiculturalism can

therefore function as a discourse of recognition without redistribution, acknowledging cultural difference while leaving underlying inequalities in land, resources, authority, and political power largely untouched. Viewed critically, the mosaic metaphor consequently reveals a tension between Canada's public image as an inclusive multicultural nation and the persistent colonial and racial hierarchies that complicate that image.

CM2 has become one of the most enduring narratives through which Canadian foreign-policy identity has been constructed since the mid-twentieth century. Its symbolic force is closely associated with the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Lester B. Pearson, then Secretary of State for External Affairs, proposed the creation of a United Nations Emergency Force to separate the belligerents and stabilize the conflict; Pearson's role subsequently earned him the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize and contributed significantly to Canada's international reputation as a peacekeeping nation. Indeed, Dorn (2005) observes that peacekeeping occupies "a place of pride in the Canadian national identity" and that Canadians have tended to regard their country as a "natural leader" in international peacekeeping. Within this conceptual framework, the abstract nation is personified as a benevolent intermediary: CANADA IS A PEACEKEEPER, CANADA IS A MEDIATOR, and, more broadly, CANADA IS A MORAL INTERNATIONAL ACTOR. The metaphor foregrounds neutrality, restraint, negotiation, multilateral cooperation, and conflict resolution, allowing Canada to distinguish its international persona from that of states more strongly associated with unilateral or explicitly military forms of power. Chapnick's (2005) examination of Canada's emergence as a self-consciously internationalist "middle power" is particularly relevant in this respect, since he shows that participation in the creation of the United Nations contributed to the development of a new Canadian national image, even though Canada's actual influence was sometimes more limited than subsequent national narratives suggested. The Suez episode subsequently acquired an almost mythic status within this self-representation: Carroll (2009) notes that Pearson's achievement helped establish "Canada's reputation as a peacekeeping nation," while the event itself entered Canadian national mythology. Politicians and public institutions have continued to reproduce this narrative; the Government of Canada, for example, describes the country's peacekeeping tradition as "an important part of our country's national identity" and portrays Canadian peacekeepers as "brokers of peace in times of crisis." The PEACEKEEPER metaphor therefore does more than describe a particular foreign-policy activity: it constructs an idealized national persona characterized by moderation, humanitarianism, diplomatic competence, and moral authority, thereby allowing Canada to claim a distinctive position between military power and political neutrality on the international stage. At the same time, Chapnick's critique of the Canadian "middle power" narrative reminds us that this metaphor should be approached as a powerful form of national self-representation rather than as an uncomplicated description of Canada's actual foreign-policy behaviour.

Of course, a critical view of CM2 may foreground the fact that Canada's peacekeeping contributions have been steadily declining since the 1990's, and to date its foreign policy has often aligned with NATO-led military interventions and arms exports (Dean 2016). Thus, CM2 has come to represent more of a national myth that fosters a sense of moral exceptionalism, especially when contrasted with Canada's domestic record, particularly regarding its treatment of Indigenous communities and systemic racism in policing and immigration.

CM3 draws upon a powerful combination of geographical, historical, and mythological imagery that represents Canada as a vast, rugged, resource-rich territory shaped by wilderness, climatic extremes, and seemingly limitless space. The metaphor has deep historical roots in European exploration and colonial expansion, when northern and western territories were frequently conceptualized as remote spaces awaiting discovery, settlement, exploitation, and incorporation into the nation. In this sense, the FRONTIER is not simply a geographical boundary but a culturally constructed space in which exploration becomes progress, territorial expansion becomes nation-building, and the extraction of natural resources becomes evidence of the land's economic potential. Francis (1997) demonstrates how such representations participate in the creation of Canadian "national dreams," showing that collective identity depends partly upon recurring stories, symbols, and historical myths through which Canadians imagine their relationship with the past and distinguish themselves from other nations. The North has consequently become one of the most persistent symbolic landscapes of Canadian identity, associated with endurance, exploration, sovereignty, independence, and the ability to master an imposing, often lethal natural environment. At the same time, the metaphor contains an important colonial dimension: conceptualizing the North as a *frontier* may implicitly represent the territory as empty or available for occupation and development, thereby marginalizing the prior and continuing presence, sovereignty, and knowledge of Indigenous and northern peoples. Contemporary political discourse continues to mobilize northern imagery in narratives of Arctic sovereignty, economic development, security, and national destiny; as the policy documents collected by Lackenbauer and Dean (2016) demonstrate, the North repeatedly functions as both a strategic territory and a symbolic component of Canada's national self-understanding. The same conceptual framework remains visible in tourism, environmental discourse, and nationalist iconography, where images of mountains, forests, snow, wildlife, open landscapes, and the Arctic frequently present Canada as a nation whose identity is inseparable from wilderness and northern space. Thus, CM3 simultaneously celebrates exploration, resilience, natural abundance, and territorial vastness while preserving traces of a colonial worldview in which land is imagined as territory to be claimed, developed, protected, and converted into national and economic resources (Francis 1997; Lackenbauer and Dean 2016).

From a critical perspective, it can be said that CM3 operates as reinforcement of a settler-colonial imaginary that erases Indigenous presence and stewardship of land: the North is viewed as a space to be "discovered" and developed, often legitimizing extractive industries and economic expansion under the guise of national development. Therefore, numerous indigenous scholars and activists challenge this framing by emphasizing relationships to land grounded in kinship, reciprocity, and sovereignty (Simpson 2014).By contrasting Land as Resource with Land as Relation, these critiques call for decolonial reconceptualizations of space and environment.

CM4 occupies the central role in political rhetoric, constructing the nation as a community bound together by relationships analogous to those of kinship,and implicitly emphasizing belonging, mutual responsibility, solidarity, care, and shared values. Within this mapping, CANADA corresponds to the family unit, citizens become family members, citizenship represents membership, and newcomers are incorporated into the national community as new relatives. The metaphor appears explicitly in Canadian institutional discourse. Marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of Canadian citizenship, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invited Canadians to reflect upon the "values we share as a Canadian family," directly linking

familial belonging with common civic principles and collective responsibility (Trudeau 2022). Immigration and citizenship discourse employs the same conceptualization even more explicitly: at a citizenship ceremony, new citizens were welcomed "into our Canadian family" and simultaneously told "welcome home," thereby combining the metaphors NATION IS FAMILY and NATION IS HOME (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2019). The family model is particularly compatible with Canada's multicultural self-representation because familial unity does not necessarily imply sameness: members may differ while remaining connected by shared obligations and a sense of collective belonging. Indeed, official immigration discourse describes diversity as something that "helps to unite Canadians," while presenting entry into citizenship as admission to the "Canadian family" (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, n.d.). At the same time, the metaphor carries potentially exclusionary implications, since every family necessarily establishes distinctions between those who belong and those who remain outside it. Harder's (2010) study of Canadian citizenship is particularly relevant in this respect, as it reveals the "kinship basis of a contemporary liberal democracy" and demonstrates how legal rules determine who can and cannot claim national belonging. CM4 therefore functions ambivalently: on the one hand, it humanizes the abstract nation by presenting citizenship in terms of intimacy, solidarity, protection, and shared responsibility; on the other, it raises questions concerning who has the authority to define the family, who is admitted to it, and whose claims to belonging may be marginalized. The metaphor consequently contributes to Canada's inclusive national self-image while simultaneously exposing the boundaries and conditions upon which national membership depends. On the other hand, objections may be raised to co-opting this mapping in reconciliation discourse to suggest a process of healing within a unified national community, yet often without addressing the foundational violence of colonization (Coulthard 2014).

CM5frames the country as a place where individuals can achieve personal, social, and economic success through hard work, determination, and freedom. Closely connected to narratives of immigration and settlement, this metaphor presents Canada as an open space in which newcomers are able to rebuild their lives, improve their material circumstances, and pursue greater security and prosperity. At the cognitive level, the metaphor often overlaps with the broader conceptual structure LIFE IS A JOURNEY: migration becomes a movement from hardship or limitation toward safety, possibility, and advancement, while Canada functions as both the destination and the enabling space in which a new trajectory can begin. The nation is therefore imagined as providing open pathways, new beginnings, and opportunities for upward mobility, reinforcing ideals of meritocracy, inclusiveness, and social progress. Within this mapping, economic and personal success becomes a destination, effort constitutes movement along the path, and obstacles such as poverty, discrimination, or displacement are conceptualized as barriers to be overcome. The metaphor is particularly powerful in immigration discourse because it links individual aspirations to a larger national narrative in which Canada is represented as welcoming, fair, and capable of rewarding initiative. At the same time, the metaphor can be critically questioned because its emphasis on individual effort and merit may obscure structural inequalities, racial discrimination, unequal access to employment and housing, or the difficulties involved in the recognition of foreign qualifications. Canada seen as a land of opportunity thus functions both as an aspirational model of Canadian identity and as an ideological narrative whose promise of equal opportunity may not always correspond fully to lived social experience.

Last but not least, CM5 constructs the country as a vast repository of natural wealth whose forests, minerals, water, agricultural land, fisheries, and energy reserves constitute both economic assets and defining features of national identity. Within this mapping, CANADA functions as a container or storehouse, while natural resources become valuable contents available for extraction, development, and exchange. The metaphor has deep historical roots in the economic development of Canada, whose expansion was closely associated with successive staple commodities such as fish, fur, timber, wheat, minerals, and energy. Innis (1930), in his influential study of the Canadian fur trade, demonstrated the extent to which the exploitation and export of natural resources shaped patterns of settlement, transportation, trade, and political development, while Watkins (1963) subsequently developed the staples approach to explain the broader relationship between resource production and Canadian economic growth. Viewed metaphorically, this tradition encourages an understanding of Canadian territory as a form of accumulated natural capital: THE LAND IS A CONTAINER, RESOURCES ARE VALUABLE CONTENTS, and EXTRACTION IS ACCESSING THE CONTENTS OF THE STOREHOUSE. Such conceptualizations have contributed to representations of Canada as a country of abundance, vastness, and economic potential, while also connecting national prosperity to the ownership and exploitation of land. At the same time, CM5 can be critically problematic because it reduces complex ecosystems and inhabited territories to inventories of exploitable commodities. By foregrounding economic value, the metaphor may background environmental degradation, ecological limits, Indigenous relationships with the land, and questions of sovereignty and resource ownership. It therefore encapsulates an important tension in Canadian identity: the natural landscape is simultaneously imagined as a source of national pride and environmental heritage and as a reservoir of material wealth to be developed for economic prosperity (Innis 1930; Watkins 1963).

Subsequent conceptual metaphors

It goes without saying that the present research cannot overlook the examination of the Canadian literature, which has continuously been shaping Canadian identity throughout history. The literature produced within and about this particular space is the main instrument through which the nation has imagined, questioned, and narrated itself, therefore the conceptual metaphors emerging from such an analysis is extremely relevant, since Canadian writers have repeatedly returned to themes such as wilderness, survival, isolation, multiculturalism, migration, regional difference, and the relationship between the individual and an immense natural landscape, transforming these experiences into recognizable cultural patterns.

An important point to be made is that the conceptual mappings provided by the analysis of Canadian literature points to an identity which mostly stems from comparison and contrast with its relevant southern neighbour. As early as 1972 Margaret Atwood attempted to explain the main characteristics of Canadian literature, and implicitly its foundational myths and metaphors, through her consistent search for recurrent images, situations, characters, and attitudes that might distinguish Canadian writing from British and American traditions, resulting in the central claim that Canadian literature is organized around two closely connected ideas: survival and victimhood. Atwood begins from the premise that national literatures tend to develop characteristic symbolic patterns, reaching the conclusion that

British literature is associated with the island, American literature with the frontier, while Canadian literature is characterized above all by survival. Survival is more than literal physical endurance: it becomes a way of conceptualizing Canadian historical, geographical, psychological, and cultural experience. The Canadian protagonist is frequently imagined not as a conquering hero but as someone who manages to endure hostile circumstances and return from them. This makes survival a particularly useful concept for your study of metaphor because Atwood effectively treats it as a national conceptual schema, which may be formulated according to the CMT theory as CANADIAN EXISTENCE IS SURVIVAL, or, more specifically, CANADIAN HISTORY IS A STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL, CANADIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY IS SURVIVAL, LIVING IN CANADA IS SURVIVING A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT.

This schema encompasses both physical geography and cultural vulnerability, highlighting how harsh weather, wilderness, isolation, difficult terrain, economic pressures, colonial history, and cultural domination become different manifestations of a larger experience of threatened existence. Atwood's survival model can also be considered as developing ideas associated with Northrop Frye's earlier concept of the garrison mentality (1965, 1971), although Atwood gives victimhood an even more central position.

This concept refers to the manner in which early Canadian settler communities, faced with an indifferent and engulfing wilderness, turned inward into small, tightly disciplined enclaves whose moral codes became rigid and unquestionable, and whose greatest fear was betrayal from within as much as attack from without, being itself built on a metaphor, namely the CONTAINER schema: an interior (bounded, safe, ordered, "us") separated by a defended boundary from an exterior (unbounded, threatening, "not-us"). This particular conceptual mapping is one of the primitive, embodied schemas that CMT treats as pre-linguistic — grounded in the basic experience of in/out, bounded/unbounded — which is part of why the metaphor lands so immediately for readers. Frye isn't inventing an arbitrary figure; he is recruiting a schema everyone already uses in their thought processes.

Riding on top of that schema is a personification: SETTLEMENT IS BESIEGEMENT, or more specifically NATURE IS AN ADVERSARY. The wilderness is not deemed as neutral terrain in this mapping, but instead is granted agency and hostility, treated as a force with intent. That may be construed as a separate metaphorical move from the container schema itself, as it assumes that the exterior may be unbounded but benign, while Frye's version requires the exterior to be actively menacing.

Once that collective thinking incorporates this source-domain structure, it gets carried over systematically, generating entailments in the target domain that the community did not have to separately devise, as they naturally derive from the main metaphor. In this particular case, when a community is conceived of as a garrison, boundary integrity becomes the primary value, so social and moral codes get treated as fixed and non-negotiable, internal dissent maps onto treachery or desertion rather than disagreement, and individual distinctiveness becomes suspect, since a garrison's survival depends on the group holding formation, not on any one member's self-expression. The deep entrenchment of this metaphor in the Canadian collective made it possible for Frye's concept to become so generative for Canadian criticism, as Atwood's survival thesis, and much of the "victim/survival" thematic reading of Canadian literature, is essentially an unpacking of what already follows once the garrison mapping has been accepted as foundational. It thus becomes obvious that the metaphor is

not mere decoration, but the source for innumerable inference definitory for the Canadian identity.

Frye's famous formulation that Canadian identity is a matter of "where is here" rather than "who am I" makes more sense against the American frontier mythology, which runs on a different image schema — PATH/JOURNEY rather than CONTAINER. The frontier metaphor maps westward expansion onto an individual's forward trajectory toward a goal (conquest, self-making), so American identity representation focuses on the traveling self ("who am I" as a bounded individual container moving through space). Frye's garrison instead subordinates the individual container to the collective one — identity is a question of which enclosure you're inside, not what's inside you.

As stated before, Lakoff and Johnson's point that every metaphor highlights certain features while suppressing others is worth examining here from a critical standpoint. Depicting the space outside the garrison as wilderness — indifferent, hostile, empty — hints at the fact that it was inhabited. The container framing structurally excludes Indigenous peoples from the "exterior" category except as part of the undifferentiated threat, which is one of the standard postcolonial objections to Frye's schema: the metaphor's entailments aren't just literary, but instead are ideologically loaded by making certain absences feel natural rather than chosen.

Conclusions

The analysis undertaken here confirms that Canadian national identity, notwithstanding its much-remarked lack of a single founding myth or unifying ethnic core, is neither incoherent nor unstructured: it is organized, made thinkable, and continually renegotiated through a limited set of conceptual metaphors that recur with remarkable consistency across political discourse, government policy, literary criticism, and popular self-representation. The six mappings examined above—CANADA IS A MOSAIC, CANADA IS A PEACEKEEPER, CANADA IS A NORTHERN FRONTIER, CANADA IS A FAMILY, CANADA IS A LAND OF OPPORTUNITY, and CANADA IS A STOREHOUSE OF RESOURCES—together with the literary schema of CANADIAN EXISTENCE IS SURVIVAL and Frye's GARRISON mentality, itself built on the CONTAINER image schema, do not describe a pre-existing national essence so much as actively construct and frame it, in the sense given to that term by both Conceptual Metaphor Theory and framing theory. Each source domain projects a distinctive structure onto the target domain of nationhood and, in doing so, foregrounds certain features of Canadian experience while consigning others to the background.

What emerges most clearly from considering these metaphors together, rather than one at a time, is not their diversity but the regularity of the tension each one contains. In every case examined, an institutionally endorsed, celebratory reading of the metaphor—diversity-in-unity for the mosaic, moral leadership for the peacekeeper, resilience and mastery for the frontier, belonging and solidarity for the family, meritocratic renewal for the land of opportunity, abundance for the storehouse of resources—coexists with a critical counter-reading that the same figurative structure works to background. That counter-reading converges, with striking consistency, on the position of Indigenous peoples and the structures of settler colonialism: the mosaic's harmonious pieces leave little room for

unresolved questions of sovereignty and dispossession; the frontier's vast, apparently empty spaces depend on a prior erasure of Indigenous presence and land relations; the family's rhetoric of shared belonging has been mobilized in reconciliation discourse without addressing the foundational colonial violence it is meant to redress; and, at the level of literary schema, the garrison's CONTAINER logic of a bounded, defended "us" against an unbounded "not-us" structurally admits Indigenous peoples only as part of the undifferentiated threat outside the walls, never as prior or coexisting occupants of the same land. That this pattern recurs across otherwise unrelated source domains—geography, kinship, economy, personification—suggests it is not incidental to any single metaphor but a structural feature of how Canadian identity has been figuratively organized more broadly.

A further connection is worth drawing explicitly between two threads the analysis otherwise kept apart: the opposition between mosaic and melting pot, and the opposition between Frye's CONTAINER and the PATH schema underlying American frontier mythology. Both oppositions are organized around the same implicit comparison. Just as Canadian pluralism defines itself against an American ideal of blending, Frye's "where is here" defines Canadian identity against an American "who am I" built on the traveling, self-making individual. Canadian identity, on this reading, is figured not merely as different from its southern neighbour but as structured, at both the political and the literary level, by a recurring contrast with it.

These findings speak to the two bodies of scholarship this study set out to bridge. To the cognitive-linguistic literature on metaphor and nationhood, more often applied to European or American cases, the Canadian material suggests that the absence of a single stable referent does not weaken metaphorical structuring but seems, if anything, to multiply it, producing not one master metaphor but a contested field of competing ones. To the political-cultural literature on Canadian identity, which has richly documented what Canadians say about themselves, the analysis has tried to show that the figurative architecture underlying that content is not a neutral vehicle for pre-formed ideas but an active constraint on which policies and self-understandings can appear natural or even sayable. These conclusions should be read within the limits acknowledged at the outset: the study draws on existing scholarship, government and institutional discourse, and canonical literary criticism rather than a purpose-built corpus, and it is written from the position of an outside observer rather than a participant in Canadian public life. The metaphors discussed are consequently best understood as the most salient and well-documented mappings in the literature rather than as an exhaustive inventory.

Future work might extend this account in at least three directions: a systematic, corpus-based tracking of how these metaphors rise, decline, or mutate across contemporary political and media discourse, in the manner Shakoury and Boers (2024) have modelled for multiculturalism specifically; a more sustained engagement with the alternative conceptual models articulated by Indigenous scholars themselves—land as relation rather than resource, kinship rather than container—treated not merely as critiques of settler metaphors but as competing metaphorical systems in their own right; and a comparative study situating the Canadian repertoire against that of other settler-colonial or officially multicultural states. What this study suggests, in the meantime, is that the figurative language through which Canada is imagined is never merely descriptive ornament. Because a metaphor selects which aspects of a concept are foregrounded and which are allowed to recede from view, the ongoing choice among mosaic and melting pot, garrison and open frontier, family and

contract, is itself a form of political work, one that shapes which national futures come to seem thinkable. Attending closely to this figurative infrastructure is therefore not a peripheral, purely linguistic exercise, but a necessary complement to the study of Canadian identity's explicit political content.

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